

June 15th: How Does Your Garden Grow?

Welcome, my friends, to our summer sermon series on the Fruits of the Spirit–this is a way for us to explore some big questions about what it means to be disciples of Jesus in our modern world. Starting next week, we'll be looking at one fruit per Sunday, all with the goal of offering some practical ways for you to grow in your faith and respond to our broken world. So we're glad you've joined us for these conversations, and we look forward to diving in deeper with you over the next few months.

Before I start with some introductory thoughts on this topic, let's take a moment to pause and pray together.

God our Gardener, in the dirt of our lives, you have planted seeds that are waiting to grow. They are hidden beneath the surface, waiting for us to water them carefully and intentionally, ready to sprout into words and deeds that are loving and kind. As we gather this morning, may we start to notice the ways that your spirit is tilling our soil, pruning away beliefs or behaviors that do not help us live as your disciples, making us fertile ground for transformation. In these moments of meditation, may we sense your gentle invitation to cultivate new fruit, and may we rise to the challenge so that this fruit can cultivate a better world. Amen.

If you asked my grandmother about her hobbies–she would have almost certainly told you about her garden. Well, gardens. Plural. Never just one.

In a little patch between her lakeside cabin and the garage, she planted flowers whose fragrance would gently float into her bedroom in the summer breeze. She and her garden club friends also took on a town beautification project, lining the main street of their small backwoods hamlet with planters that bloomed with bright colors and greeted all town guests as they passed the single stop sign. She volunteered at the hospital in the next town over, sometimes visiting patients, but sometimes she could be found elbows deep in floral arrangements that would be brought to rooms after major surgeries or

procedures. And of course, she spent many hours at my family's house, tending to the wild areas along our property line where forsythia sprouted every spring. If our yard ever looked lovely, it was because she was there—helping my mom pull thousands of weeds, spreading mulch into garden beds, or finding a new perennial to plant.

In her mind, she was a gardener, and a good one. There wasn't anything she couldn't grow—when she put her mind to it, she succeeded. But in my mind, I don't think the title “gardener” goes far enough. I was reminiscing with my mom the other day, and she said something to me about how Grammy didn't just garden, she cultivated. She was a cultivator, she knew how to take an overgrown hosta and split it into several parts that could all be replanted. She knew when to be delicate with a bundle of roots, she knew which type of tomato to plant in the troublesome New Hampshire soil, she knew which flowers liked full sun and which preferred the shade. She never overplanted, choosing instead to give all of her little babies space to grow and spread out as they desired. She could touch a patch of dirt and know exactly what needed to be added: water, fertilizer, or just a couple of good worms.

Most of all, she knew that any kind of growth takes time and effort. She knew that planning ahead and putting in the work were the best way to ensure a beautiful outcome. Year after year, she was outside in all kinds of weather—watching, pruning, protecting, and delighting in the task of cultivating something special. Season after season, she would invite us to help us to help her lay down fresh compost, get our hands dirty, and join her in this labor. Most of the time, I declined her invitation—I wasn't interested in the feeling of having dirt beneath my fingernails—but now, I wish I had asked for more advice. I wish I had asked for some wisdom, because she would have had just the right thing to say. And not just about gardening, but about everything.

In her little cabin plot, nestled in between the fragrant flowers and careful rows of herbs, was a statue of St. Anthony, the patron saint of lost items. Now, whenever I feel lost, I treat her like my own personal St. Anthony, hoping that she'll help me find whatever truth or insight that I am missing. So when I

turned to her this week, hoping that she would lend me some of her garden knowledge and general intuition, here's what I came up with.

Some of us feel very lost right now. When we turn on the news, or read the paper, or scroll TikTok, we are bombarded by a reality that leaves us overwhelmed and even paralyzed. There seems to be so much wrong with our world: rampant violence, injustice of every kind, chaos in every corner of the globe. And our ability to fix it seems so small, perhaps even too miniscule to notice. We are just individual people, lost in a sea of evil and brokenness, feeling wave after wave hit our shores and psyches.

It feels awful. Most days, I struggle to find any words at all to describe the existential angst that is bubbling up inside of me—those emotions just come out as rage, or tears, or a need to listen to Taylor Swift's Reputation album really loudly. And I'm sure there are some of you who feel the same way: tired, scared, powerless. But thankfully, we've all picked the perfect place to be when those feelings come up: we're here, together, in community. We come to be with other people who also feel anxious, or furious, or hopeless. When we look around the room, we see our own emotions in each other's eyes, and for a moment, we feel less alone.

And that's exactly how Jesus' disciples felt, the day before Pentecost. After returning to earth, Jesus spent some time with his disciples, giving them a few final teachings and pearls of wisdom. But then, he had to go, and the disciples had to say goodbye for the second time. The final time. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he shared this prophecy: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit...It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Even with these words of comfort and hope, the disciples wonder about what is going to happen to them, they are facing uncertainty and doubt all over again.

I don't think it's any coincidence that Pentecost happened when the disciples were scared about this new season, and I don't think it's any coincidence that the Holy Spirit descended upon them when they were gathered together. This gift of God's presence came to them when they needed it most, and it came to an entire community—and I think that's very much on purpose. I think God intended that this power that is given to us exceeds all of our human capacities, and it is ours to share with each other—it is beyond our individual abilities, and it was always meant to be used to uplift, empower, and liberate others. It is a power that transforms us from followers into leaders, and it is a power that transforms entire groups of people into reconciled, redeemed, and whole nations.

As we learned last week, the Holy Spirit made it so that this diverse gathering in Jerusalem suddenly could understand one another, as everyone could hear the message of the disciples in their own language. The Holy Spirit made it so that three thousand people from all ethnicities, backgrounds, and cultural groups were moved by this moment—and all of these individuals committed their lives to this mission of hope.

Just a few decades later, the Apostle Paul is writing to the early church in Galatia, a province in Asia Minor. In the first century, these infant congregations were struggling with questions of diversity and division, specifically related to the relationship between Jewish followers of Jesus and Gentile converts to this movement. Their disagreements weren't just about ritual purity laws or the necessity of keeping kosher—although both of those issues are at play in this text—but about identity and belonging. Paul is very concerned about this tendency to see others as opponents rather than fellow disciples—and he spends a lot of time in this letter talking about how to address these disagreements, and how to move forward as a more unified community.

And to further illustrate this point, Paul goes back to their common origin story: the birth of the multiethnic, multicultural church at Pentecost. He's clear with them that this moment of encounter with the divine has pointed God's

people in a specific direction: they are no longer separate groups with separate identities, but a fellowship of disciples with a singular purpose. Not separate, but singular.

So that brings us to chapter 5, where we find our text for today. Earlier in this chapter, Paul reminds these new Christians what it means to live as people who have been given the Holy Spirit. He writes, “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.”

But he doesn’t stop there—he tells these congregations that there’s an antidote to the brokenness that they see and experience—and Paul calls that antidote, the “fruit of the spirit.”

And here’s where I think of my grandmother again. Because I know this kind of language must have resonated with her even more than it resonates with me. You see, Paul uses this metaphor of fruit intentionally—drawing upon the agrarian imagery and agricultural world of the first century to make this theological point. His audience would have been filled with shepherds, farmers, vineyard workers, and bread makers—all of whom would have had their hands fully immersed in this work of being in close contact with the land. Like my grandmother, they would have understood the labor that goes into planting a new field of crops, or harvesting at just the right time, or feeling the dirt beneath their fingers.

And so Paul tells them that the way to defeat evil and injustice and hateful forces in our world is by cultivating fruit in our own spiritual garden—and these are the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. He says that through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have the ability to grow something beautiful and whole inside of us, and we have the responsibility to share these gifts with our fellow human beings.

Unfortunately, this is not the kind of fruit that comes in neat plastic containers at Winco or Fred Meyer, it's not something that we can just rely on someone else to produce for us. It takes our own deliberate action and discipline to develop—we have to put in the work to nurture these virtues and gifts, we have to weed out the thoughts and behaviors that are standing in the way of our growth, and we have to prune away old habits and beliefs that might be keeping us trapped in mindsets and practices that add to the chaos in our world rather than challenge it.

And like real gardening, real cultivating, this spiritual fruit takes perseverance, because we might be asked to grow it even when the conditions aren't perfect. We might be called to show these fruits to a broken world when we're scared. We might be called to demonstrate these fruits to our nation when voices of hatred get loud. We might be called to get our hands dirty when our neighbors are struggling or threatened. We might have to wrestle with our own beliefs about identity and belonging, so that we ensure that our city and county are places where everyone is safe and welcome.

I know that it can feel like small potatoes, pun intended, but Paul doesn't seem to think so. Paul says that because this fruit comes from the Spirit, and because it is the result of the divine presence inside of us, it's bigger and more powerful than anything we could achieve on our own. We're not limited by our own human failings, and we don't have to worry that the fruit isn't perfect—God will take care of that. It's simply our job to show up, commit to cultivating something beautiful, and not give up when life gets tough.

So over the next eleven weeks, we're going to be learning together about how to engage in this act of faithful cultivation. Each week, we'll look at a specific fruit of the spirit, or a topic that helps us put these fruits into practice, and we'll dig in deeper to this solution to the brokenness around us. We'll ask, "How do we grow this fruit inside of us?" And "How do other people experience this fruit as it cultivates within our communities?" As we meditate on these fruits, we will remind each other that we are not powerless to fight against evil and injustice—we can do things that will repair or strengthen

relationships, build trust, support equity, and reveal God's love to our neighbors. We can do dozens, if not hundreds of small actions in a single summer, and even if you don't believe me now, I hope that by the end of August you'll witness that small actions can add up to big changes, and all of that matters.

If you're looking for an easy way to get started, our Fruits of the Spirit Bingo can give you some ideas—pick some acts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control to try out, and if you find other opportunities to show these fruits, we would be excited to hear about it.

That brings us to my closing thoughts: just like Pentecost, this is a holistic movement. It involves you, and me, and everyone else who is laboring for justice in our world. Because we're in this together as friends and family, we have the chance to support each other's journeys, even if they look different than our own. We might have our own struggles, and our unique spiritual gardens inside of us, but we can and should lean on each other. As we navigate the challenges that we face, or the anxieties of these weeks, or the negative news stories, we can and should get curious with each other—asking, “What fruit are you cultivating right now?” Or “What fruit is growing for you this week.” Or simply, “How does your garden grow?”

So if I ask you that question a few weeks from now, I don't mean it in a church-y, weird way—I mean it like my grandmother the gardener would say it. I mean it with tenderness, I mean it with a desire to see all of us blossom. I mean it as a person who cares deeply about cultivating beauty and wholeness in our world, and I mean it as someone who is growing and working alongside you. I mean it as someone who can feel just as lost as you do, but I also mean it as someone who is willing to get my hands dirty with you, today and everyday.

My friends, may our individual and collective gardens bear good fruit this summer, and may our faithful cultivation shape this world, little by little, until we meet again.

Amen.